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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Do family factors and gender influence violent behaviour in Thai adolescents?: A cross-sectional study

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ABSTRACT

Background: Adolescent violence is one of the key social problems in Thailand. WHO (2002) has identified Thailand as 8th (out of 73 countries) in the number of murders committed by adolescents. A review of the literature found that one important factor may be the family environment. However, there is little evidence identifying relevant family characteristics in Thailand. Therefore, to prevent violent behaviour in Thai adolescents, relevant professionals need a better understanding of the family factors that influence the use of violence. **Objective:** To identify risk and protective factors associated with the family that may influence violent behaviour in Thai adolescents and examine the role of gender.

Methods: This study was conducted among adolescents aged 15-18 years. Validated self-report questionnaires were used to collect data and t-tests, correlation, and multiple regressions were used to examine the relationships between variables.

Results: Males reported significantly more physical fights than females, whereas the females reported using significantly more verbal bullying than the male adolescents. The findings revealed that positive parenting practice, family relationship characteristics, and parent child attachment were negatively correlated (protective) and reduced the violent behaviour. A close relationship between parent and child and high family income were identified as protective factors whereas father's with a master degree was identified as a risk factor for violence in adolescents.

Conclusion: Results suggest that males used more physical violence but females used more verbal bullying. Adolescents who receive practical support from their parents, and have a close relationship with their family were less likely to report violent behaviour. Therefore, positive parenting practice, family relationships and parent-child attachment could be strengthened and gender differences should be considered in the prevention of adolescent violence

Keywords: Violence; violent behaviour; adolescents; family factors; gender.

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Introduction

Adolescence, the period of life between 10 and 19 years (WHO, 2010), is a time of rapid growth and development that encompasses the physical, emotional, and social dimensions. During this period, adolescents go through many physical, psychological, and social changes (Marcus, 2007). Adapting to these can cause stress, feelings of negativity, and anger because of perceived and actual failures (Satcher, 2009). Many longitudinal studies have shown that developmental changes can lead to violence in adolescence and early adulthood (Stattin & Magnusson, 1989; Pulkkinen, 1987; Felson, 1992). Therefore, the emotional and physical changes experienced contribute to the turbulence of the adolescent period compared to earlier stages of development.

Violence is defined by WHO as 'the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment, or deprivation' (Krug, Dahlberg, & Mercy et al., 2002). In this study, the definition of violence by WHO was used to delineate violent behaviour, and adolescent violence specifically includes 'aggressive behaviour (verbal and physical against others), such as bullying, slapping, hitting, or fighting, and delinquent behaviour, such as robbery and damage to property of others' (Page & Page, 2011). This study focuses only on interpersonal violence (verbal and physical) and does not include self-harm.

Adolescent violence is one of the key social problems in Thailand. WHO (2002) identified Thailand as 8th (out of 73 countries) in the number of murders committed by youths. Official criminal records (Thai National Statistical Office (NSO), 2004) show that there has been a marked increase in the number of violent adolescent criminals in Thailand. A report by the Department of Juvenile Observation and Protection (Department of Juvenile Observation and Protection, 2008) identified the number of cases handled by all juvenile observation and protection centres increased from 36,080 in 2005 to 51,128 in 2007. Most offences involved violent behaviour. This concurs with the data from a national survey which showed that over 30 % of Thai children and adolescents have behaved violently, particularly physical fights, theft, and destroying public property (Prasert & Phetdee, 2009). Furthermore, Youth Risk Behaviour Survey of Thai Youths in Bangkok conducted by Ruangkanchanasetr et al. (2005) reported that

one third of participants had been involved in at least one violent event, 14% of participants had been physically assaulted and 8.5% carried a weapon to school. In 2008, a national survey of students in high school (Child Watch, 2009) found that 13-18 % of students have been physically assaulted by friends and 21-29% of students carried a weapon to school. Recently, the Department of Mental Health (2010) showed that nearly one third of Thai children and adolescents have experienced physical aggression.

An extensive review of the literature, including from Thailand, identified that family factors were associated with violent behaviours in adolescents (Ruangkanchanasetr et al., 2005; Chantapreda, Thanwattanakul, Sawangjaroen, et al., 2003; Laeheem, Kuning, & McNeil, 2009; Isaranurug, Auewattana, & Chansatitporn, et al., 2001). Family factors, including poor parental relationships, marital breakdown (Ruangkanchanasetr et al., 2005), poverty, exposure to violence in the family (Laeheem, Kuning, & McNeil, 2009), inadequate parental response to violence (Chantapreda, et al., 2003), and low levels of family bonding (Rodniam, 2007) have been associated with an increased likelihood of violence. On the other hand, higher parental education, an intact family, and higher family income were found to be associated with reduced risk of engaging in physical violence (Isaranurug, et al., 2001; Pradubmook-Sherer, 2009). Moreover, a study by Shetgiri, Kataoka, Ponce, et al (2010) reported that the male gender was associated with a higher incidence of violence among American participants.

The Thai government has national policies, targets, and lead agencies to prevent and control violence among children and adolescents (WHO, 2007). However, violent behaviour in adolescents is still a serious problem in Thai society.

In conclusion, it seems that adolescent violence results from a complex interplay of family factors that may have an influence from early childhood to adolescence. Violence in adolescents may be decreased or prevented if the factors influencing violent behaviour are significantly reduced or eliminated (Dahlberg & Krug, 2002) and protective factors are promoted. Most research undertaken in Thailand has examined risk behaviour in adolescents and there is little evidence identifying family factors. Therefore, this study examined family factors in relation to violent behaviour in adolescents.

Aim

To identify risk and protective factors associated with the family that influence violent behaviour in adolescents and examine the role of gender.

Method

Design and settings:

This study was a cross-sectional study carried out in Thailand among Thai adolescents from October 2012 to December 2012.

Sample size and method:

A representative sample of 400 adolescents from two schools was identified: 200 students in a public technical college and 200 students in a public high school in Chiang Mai, Thailand. They were recruited from grade 10-12 (15-18 years) in the high school and years 1-3 of diploma level (15-18 years) in the technical college. The age range of 15-18 years was selected as this is when there is the highest risk of involvement in violent behaviour.

Measurements:

There were 5 components, including demographic data, positive parenting practices, such as parental rewards for good behaviour, family relationship characteristics, such as relationships between parents and children, parent-child attachment, including the degree of warmth in the parent-child relationship, and violent behaviour, including the self-report delinquency and the aggression questionnaire. Five validated questionnaires were used following permission from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in the U.S.A. They included the positive parenting practices questionnaire, the family relationship characteristics questionnaire, the parent-child attachment questionnaire, the modified aggression questionnaire, and the self report delinquency questionnaire.

Translation issues:

The recommendations of Maneesriwongul & Dixon (2004) review were used. Firstly the questionnaires were translated into Thai by the first author and then checked by a nurse translator who is familiar with spoken English. Then, the questionnaires were back-translated into English by a nurse who is familiar with English-speaking culture. Then, the second version was

compared to the original by an expert who is English and also knowledgeable of Thai culture. Finally, 30 adolescent volunteers were used to test the translated instrument. The consistency of the responses regarding the meaning of context and the language, and the time taken during the piloting were used to develop the final version of the questionnaires.

Reliability of questionnaires:

The questionnaires were tested for internal consistency by using Cronbach's alpha coefficient of rating scale. The results of the internal consistency of the questionnaires demonstrated a range of acceptable scores (approximately .7 or higher).

Ethical issues:

The study was approved by the Faculty of Health Research Ethics Committee, University of East Anglia, UK, and gatekeeper permission from the two schools in Thailand was given. An information sheet and consent form was offered to persons who expressed interest before making decision to take part of this study. The participants also had to return the written consent form with their parent's signatures (age of consent is 20 years in Thailand). The participants were assured that confidentiality at all times through the use of a number or a pseudonym.

Data collection:

The participants were invited to complete the questionnaires and data collection took place in the high school and the technical college during break time. The participants were given 25-30 minutes to complete the questionnaires which were administered by the first author (RW).

Statistical analysis:

All analyses were conducted using SPSS version 16.0. T-tests, correlation analyses, and multiple regression analyses were used to examine the relationship between the variables and to identify predictors of violent behaviour and gender differences.

Results

Sample characteristics:

Of the 400 participants, 67% of adolescents were male and 33% were female, and the mean age was 16.8 years.

Most participants (68%) lived with both parents, 14% lived with their mother only, whereas 6% lived their father only, and approximately 1% lived alone in accommodation. The majority of participants (73%) reported that their parents were married and living with their spouse. One third of the fathers (33%) graduated with a first degree or higher, whereas one third of the mothers (35%) attended primary school only. Only 1% of participants indicated that they did not know their parents' educational level. Nearly one third of participants (32%) reported that their families earned approximately 10,001-20,000 baht per month (approximately \$333-\$666) (comfortable income).

Gender differences in violence and parenting

The males reported having significantly more physical fights than the females, whereas the females reported using significantly more verbal bullying than the male adolescents. However, the male adolescents were significantly more likely to behave violently than the female adolescents (as shown in Table 1).

Table 1. T-test results of violent behaviour by gender (n=400)

Gender	N	Mean	SD	t-test	Sig
Male	269	55.17	6.72	3.88	<0.001
Female	131	52.51	5.84		

The results demonstrated that female adolescents reported more positive parenting practices than the male adolescents, including winks, smiles, hugs or kisses (non-verbal affirmation), doing something special together, and getting tangible rewards. However, the male adolescents reported getting more positive comments (verbal affirmation) than female adolescents. Female adolescents also reported overall more positive family relationship characteristics, including cohesive relationships, faith in family judgements, and positive experiences with the family. Additionally, female adolescents reported a higher mean level of attachment than male adolescents.

Correlations and multiple regressions

Correlational analyses was undertaken to investigate the relationship between family factors and violent behaviour. The findings were that positive parenting practice, family relationship characteristics and parent-child attachment were negatively correlated with

violent behaviour (as shown in Table 2). This meant that adolescents who reported high positive parenting practices, positive family relationship characteristics, and positive attachment with their parents were significantly less likely to behave violently.

Table 2. Pearson Correlation analyses results showing the relationship between family factors and violent behaviour. (n=400)

Family factors	R	Sig
Positive parenting practices	-.156**	<0.001
Family relationship characteristics	-.356**	<0.001
Parent-child attachment	-.274**	<0.001

Finally, in order to identify predictors of violent behaviour, the results from multiple regression analyses identified three variables, namely family relationship characteristics, high family income (>50,000 baht (approximately \$1,666) per month), and fathers with a master degree, predicted the use of violence in adolescents (as shown in Table 3). Specifically, positive family relationship characteristics and family income > 50,000 baht per month (approximately \$1,666) were identified as protective factors whereas father's with a master's degree was identified as a risk factor.

Discussion

The results of the study demonstrated that the male adolescents are significantly more likely to report behaving violently than the female adolescents. This result is consistent with a cross sectional study in Thailand by Sherer and Sherer (2011) who found that Thai male adolescents were more violent than females and this is similar to the findings from other countries. For example, a study by Shetgiri et al. (2010) found that the male gender was associated with a higher incidence of violence among American participants. Bacchini, Miranda, and Affuso (2011) demonstrated that male gender predicted a higher involvement in antisocial behaviour. Kim and Kim (2005) found that male adolescents were more likely to exhibit an antisocial personality, including violence. It can be concluded from the evidence that male adolescents are more likely to use violence.

Interestingly, the finding of the study also showed that the females used significantly more verbal

Table 3. Regression model for predicting violent behaviour (n=400)

Variables	b	SE	p-value*	95% CI	
				Lower	Upper
Family relationship characteristics	-.184	.026	.000*	-.23	-.13
Income 50,000 baht per month	-2.990	1.12	.008*	-5.18	-.78
Father with master degree	2.803	1.02	.006*	.79	4.81
Interception	75.380	2.97	.000*	69.54	81.22

b=regression coefficient, SE=Standard Error, *p .01 significant (two-tailed) (using the stepwise method), CI=Confidence Interval, $R^2=.152$, Adj. $R^2=.145$, SEE=6.06, F=23.603, Sig F= 0.000, Durbin-Watson=1.755

bullying than the male adolescents. This result is consistent with a western study (Wang, Iannotti, & Nansel, 2009) which found that girls were more involved in bullying. This could be because girls are expected to be non violent (Turkel, 2007) and parents try to discourage direct physical aggression in girls (Turkel, 2007) so they are not allowed to express their anger physically. As a result, they may use to express their negative emotions by verbal bullying. It seems that both male adolescents and female adolescents behave violently but they express it in different ways

However, in this study, the female adolescents reported: being rewarded for good behaviour, increased positive relationships with the family, including cohesive relationships and attachment behaviour than the male adolescents. It seems that the females are more likely to experience close relationships and proximity to their family. This may help them to develop warm interpersonal relationships, and use less physical aggression. This is similar to a Spanish study by Garaigordobil, Maganto, & Pérez, et al. (2009) who found that female adolescents had significantly higher scores in pro-social cognitive and social behaviour. It can be concluded that the gender of the adolescent appears to affect the way that the parents respond to them and that close cohesive relationships with the family may help to prevent female adolescents from using physical violence.

It is interesting that the results obtained in this study emphasise the existence of gender differences in expressing violence. This may be because females learn to express their anger in convert ways and possibly demonstrates that gender differences relate to the expression of violence rather than the view that males are violent and females are not. There is a need to reflect on the types of parenting styles used with adolescents and the need to critically analyse the patterns of behaviour associated with gender that adolescents learn are needed.

The study findings were similar to studies in both western countries and Thailand (Rhucharoenpornpanich, Chamrathirong, Fongkaew, et al., 2010; Aceves, Berkeley, 2007; Colman, Murray, Abbott, et al., 2009; Appleyard, Berlin, 2007) and confirmed that adolescents having a higher level of positive parenting practices, a healthy family relationship, and good parent-child attachment were less likely to behave violently. For example a study by Rhucharoenpornpanich et al. (2010) investigated parenting practices and delinquent behaviours among Thai adolescents and found that parents who raised their children using boundaries, such as setting rules, and supervising them, in adolescence were less likely to develop delinquent behaviours. A study by Isaranurug et al. (2001) found that Thai adolescents who reported high quality relationships with parents were less likely to engage in violent behaviour. In western studies, for example Aceves and Berkeley (2007), found that adolescents reporting positive relationships with parents were less likely to learn violence and Colman et al. (2009) suggested that good social support from the family can help protect adolescents against emotional and behavioural problems, including violence. Moreover, Appleyard and Berline (2007) found that children who had secure attachments with their parents are more likely to have appropriate interactions with others, to manage their emotions, and to have strong problem solving skills which means they can resolve issues without using violence.

Additionally, the results from multiple regression analyses showed that adolescents who have a close relationship with their parents and live in a high income family are less likely to behave violently and so these factors were protective. These findings are similar to studies by Pradubmook-Sherer (2009) and Isaranurug et al. (2001). According to Bradley and Corwyn's study (2002) findings, a higher income is associated with mature cognitive and emotional development in children.

This money may provide greater resources to cope with everyday stressors which then enable parents to interact more often and more positively with their children (Barnett, Brown, & Shore, 2004). The quality and stability of the relationships between parents and children may help to prevent children from using violence. These significant findings help to confirm the importance of family factors that influence violent behaviour in adolescents not only in western countries but also in Thailand.

Interestingly, the finding from the study showed that a father with a master's degree was identified as a risk factor which means that adolescents were more likely to behave violently. The finding is in contrast to a study in Thailand in 2009 by Pradubmook-Sherer (2009) who found that children having higher parental education were less likely to engage in violent behaviour in adolescents. It could be because in Thailand, the notion of 'saving face', which is the way of thinking of Thai people to gain power and status within a group, is still a factor that influences adult behaviour (Persons, 2008). Therefore, parents may do anything to prevent loss of face in particularly in the highly educated family. Moreover, the Thai family is hierarchical with the father as the family leader. Thus, the father will set high expectations and pressurise his children to achieve his needs even when they may not be the child's needs. The difference in views between the father and child may cause conflict and communication breakdown that is related to weakening the bond between the parent and the adolescent (Rodniam, 2007). A poor relationship with parents was related to violent behaviour in Thai adolescents (Ruangkanchanasetr, 2005) and consequently, adolescents may engage in violent behaviour. However, it is difficult to conclude clearly the relationship because of the cross-sectional design of this study and further longitudinal studies are needed to examine this relationship over time.

This study provides significant factors associated with the family, including parenting practices, family relationships, parent child attachment, family income, and gender differences influencing violent behaviour in adolescents which may help to inform the design of violence prevention programmes. However, a limitation of this study is the single locality of the sample (one province), so further studies could be undertaken in other parts of Thailand, that are more urban in order to encompass a wider social spectrum to confirm the identified factors influencing violent behaviour in adolescents.

Conclusion:

An overview of the study demonstrates that there are many factors, including family factors and gender that contribute to adolescent violence. A high family income and children receiving disciplined approach, and reporting a close relationship and good attachment to their parents are less likely to behave violently. Moreover, the findings of study show that males are more likely to use physical violence, whereas the females reported used significantly more verbal bullying. This means that school nurses could provide advice on how to manage both physical and verbal bullying with a view to highlighting possible gender differences in behaviour. Nurses/health visitors who work with babies and young families need to educate parents about the protective factors that help to prevent violence in children and also need to keep a careful eye on families where they perceive insecure attachments, difficult relationships and poor discipline. The results of the study have identified that many factors (but not all) influencing violence in adolescents in Thailand, are similar to other countries. Therefore, gender differences and specific family factors are identified and further longitudinal studies are needed to verify the relationships.

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